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Strategic Insight

Occupation of Iraq: Geostrategic and Institutional Challenges

by James A. Russell

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The occupation of Iraq represents a profound strategic challenge for the United States as a nation, its political leadership and its military institutions. The Bush Administration has placed American credibility squarely on the line with its commitment to restore a civil society in Iraq. Not since decisions made at the outset of the Vietnam War has American prestige and power become so vested in achieving a singularly defined outcome in a distant land far from its shores.

The early commitment of forces to Vietnam was made with the best of intentions and with a certain naiveté that eventually got drowned in the rice paddies and lost amidst the jungles of Southeast Asia. At the time, the political leadership repeatedly assured the American people that the task would be relatively simple and that the nation's political-military objectives could be accomplished in a short period at relatively little cost. The Vietnam War eventually broke the Johnson presidency politically, had profound fiscal consequences that laid the groundwork for the inflationary times of the 1970s, and, perhaps, most importantly, challenged the spirit and unity of the nation.

While the parallels between Vietnam and Iraq are easily overdrawn, that does not make moot any analysis of these parallels and should not discourage the process of drawing analytically useful inferences. There is similarity between the broad objectives that we hoped to achieve through the use of force in both cases—installing and supporting a new government more supportive of American interests. And, as was the case in Vietnam, today the nation's political leadership seems to have become inexorably vested in a successful outcome on difficult terrain in a far away land. Last, as was the case in Vietnam, forces have been committed in Iraq with the best of intentions—of ending a brutal and dangerous dictatorship and rebuilding a civil society.

Despite some superficial similarities, however, Iraq presents a different set of operational and tactical challenges. In Vietnam, we confronted an entrenched, organized and motivated opponent that had a seemingly limitless capacity to absorb punishment, and, almost as important—a virtually limitless source of external supplies. Fears that an invasion of North Vietnam would have prompted a major war with China also geographically bounded the theater of operations. (Revisionist interpretations of this historical factor notwithstanding, it remains unclear how we would have fared any better than the French had we invaded and occupied the north.) In Iraq, armed opposition to the occupation seems limited to the Sunni areas of central Iraq and apparently is being orchestrated by the leftover Saddam/Baathist security apparatus. While these forces can draw on substantial sources of cached weapons and cash, their sources of external supply appear limited.

From the perspective of using military force to achieve national objectives, one critical difference between Iraq and Vietnam is that today's volunteer military is a totally different institution. By and large, the force is more professional, better trained and better equipped than its predecessor from the 1960s. The battlefield performance of the nation's force in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere leaves no doubt about its overall effectiveness. But unlike the draft-era military of the 1960s, the core of today's military is largely segregated from society at large—its own "system within a system" that operates according to its own

rules (Uniform Code of Military Justice) and largely lives and works in its own neighborhoods (bases). This separation creates a convenient illusion for the public that use of the force is cost free to the country writ large, and that any pain and suffering is felt solely by those paid to do the job. But in Iraq, the stakes for the country, its leadership and its military will require a unity of national purpose as the costs will invariably mount for what will have to be a long-term commitment for the entire nation. This is the broadly defined strategic challenge

Institutional Challenges

In addition to developing a broadly based consensus to support the mission in Iraq, the nation's ability to successfully achieve its objectives there is tied to a series of institutional and operational challenges facing our military forces around the world. During the week of July 25, 2003, seemingly unrelated events in distant parts of the globe illustrated the challenges that lie ahead. In Iraq, U.S. troops surrounded and killed Saddam's loathsome sons, Uday and Qusay. In Washington, National Security Adviser Condoleeza Rice is reported to have consulted via phone with Iceland Prime Minister David Oddson over the continued stationing of U.S. military forces on Iceland. Rice and Oddson are said to have discussed U.S. plans to withdraw the four remaining F-15s from the island, with possible future reductions in the P-3 squadron that remains based there. Meanwhile, in Honolulu, U.S. military representatives met with their South Korean counterparts to discuss the restructuring (i.e., reduction) of the U.S. military presence on the Korean peninsula.

Various commentators have noted that the commitment of 148,000 troops in Iraq, 30,000 in the surrounding Gulf area, plus 10,000 more deployed in Afghanistan have placed an unsustainable burden on an already over-stretched global military posture. In Iraq, strains are being seen in ad hoc reporting on supposed morale problems that stem from a stressful operating environment and the lack of a short-term rotation plan to cycle troops through on a relatively predictable schedule. Officials recently announced a plan to start troop rotations this fall that will include the insertion of 8,000 foreign troops.[1] The Army is reported to have only three active brigades (out of a total of 33) available for new missions, with 21 brigades deployed overseas (16 in Iraq).[2] According to the Defense Department, the Army is estimated to have 370,000 troops deployed in 120 countries. Calling up more reserve units—in addition to the estimated 205,000 reservists now on active duty—seems unavoidable and serious consideration apparently is being given to expanding the Army.

While the consultations with Reykjavik and talks in Honolulu won't provide short-term relief for those on the ground in Iraq and elsewhere, the Bush Administration's reported review of the nation's global military footprint may result in dramatic restructuring of forward-deployed forces around the world. The Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) provided the first indications that the Bush Administration would be undertaking a comprehensive review of the U.S. global force posture to reorient forward deployed forces away from a structure created to serve Cold War needs. The QDR called for reorienting the nation's forward deployed posture and tailoring the force structure to better address local contingencies in theater.[3] The report generally called for a mix of forward-deployed forces to perform a wide variety of different missions, ranging from forcible entry, long-range precision strikes, civil affairs, and reconnaissance—all the way to information assurance operations.

The first outlines of this plan call for the creation of a new facilities infrastructure to support forward deployed units in an "arc of instability" that extends virtually around the world, from Southeast Asia through the Middle East and North Africa and into the Southern Hemisphere.[4] The objective of the new basing scheme is to create an infrastructure for forward deployed units to quickly identify and react to potential terrorist threats with reduced warning time and without the need for timely logistical buildups. Efforts made during the 1990s in the Persian Gulf provide a template for the way forward that includes the following main elements: (1) concluding agreements to gain access to facilities and prepositioning of military equipment; (2) establishing forward headquarters elements to coordinate military exercises and work with host nation militaries; (3) agreement to allow military construction of facilities that meet U.S. military specifications; (4) obtaining host-nation agreement governing the legal status of U.S. forces deployed in forward areas; (5) prepositioning military equipment and other logistical support afloat at

various points around the globe; (6) building interoperability with the host nation militaries through training exercises and foreign military sales. The sustained and systematic approach undertaken in the Gulf during the 1990s provided the infrastructure for Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom over the last two years. This is a model that, in all likelihood, will be replicated elsewhere.

The new U.S. facility at Al Udeid in Qatar has developed into a major operational hub for U.S. forces throughout the theater. The facilities infrastructure throughout the Gulf serves as a model that may be replicated elsewhere as the Bush Administration contemplates a new basing scheme for U.S. forces around the world. The Qataris built the facility in the mid 1990s with the sole purpose of enticing the United States military to take up residence. It would appear that they have succeeded.

Operations in Iraq and Afghanistan provide the first glimpse of the impact that sustained and continuous global military operations will have on the nation's force structure. The Navy, for example, is moving rapidly to adapt its expeditionary capability to the needs of the new environment. A new fleet readiness plan is being prepared that will change the time-honored aircraft carrier 18-month maintenance and training cycle that supports 6-month missions. The plan's objective is to cut the 18-month cycle in half—making more carriers available to support global operations in a wider variety of theaters around the globe.[5] The carrier maintenance plan represents only one part of an evolving Navy internal plan of what is being called "global conops,"—or global concept of operations that will allow the Navy to surge more carriers into operational theaters on shorter notice. The Navy will need to address the impact that the increased operational tempo will have on personnel retention and morale.

Tasking the existing force structure with varied and more frequent missions in new theaters highlights the importance of organizational efficiency. In Iraq, the emphasis on organizational efficiency is particularly acute given the scarce assets at hand to augment forces now on the ground. To help address this general issue, Secretary Rumsfeld plans to "transform" the nation's military institutions by, among other things, moving to concepts of "network centric warfare." Secretary Rumsfeld is also said to be considering far reaching changes to shift more duties from reserve to active components and to expand the use of civilian contractors to functions now being performed by the active force.[6] Providing the heartbeat of transformation are advanced information processing technologies that transmit secure, common operational pictures in real time to headquarters elements and deployed units. This information provides enhanced situational awareness to combat units as well as targeting information that can be fed into a new family of extremely accurate conventional stand-off munitions using global positioning system coordinates. Linking coalition forces into the secure network further multiplies the impact these technologies can have on the battlefield. It stands to reason that networked forces will be more efficient and combat effective than those that are not.

Adapting the force structure in Iraq and around the world to the concepts of transformation and network centric warfare will not be easy. The idea of operating in efficient "networks" will be difficult to adapt to our current vertically constructed hierarchical military organizations. The nation's military institutions are tradition-bound hierarchical and bureaucratic organizations that have inculcated behavioral characteristics consistent with their institutional values. History, tradition, politics, the mission and the bureaucratic imperative of organizational survival shape these institutional values. It is these bureaucratic and institutional imperatives that have resulted in what any observer would characterize as an extremely effective but inherently inefficient stove-piped organizational force structure with three navies, four air forces, two armies and various special forces components. All these organizations are supported by duplicative functions dealing with personnel and facilities management, training, requirements generation

and weapons procurement. These organizations are only dragged reluctantly into buying common weapons systems—which is understandable given their different institutional cultures and operational requirements.

Screen displays from the Global Command and Control System provide headquarters elements, ship command centers and combat units with unprecedented capabilities. The screen display is created by data feeds from a variety of sensors. The displays provide a backbone for all operations by enhancing situational awareness through a "common operational picture" that can be seen at virtually all levels of the chain of command.

To be sure, tremendous strides have been made in the last 10 years in the arena of joint task force operations, Operation Iraqi Freedom being only the latest example. But huge hurdles remain in overcoming organizational and bureaucratic resistance to the concepts of operational and organizational efficiency that are suggested by transformation and network centric warfare. These are huge institutional challenges as the nation contemplates military engagement in Iraq and around the world on an unprecedented scale.

Tactical Issues

Several of these issues are on display in one way or another inside Iraq. While much attention has focused on "right sizing" the force and whether there are adequate forces inside Iraq to accomplish the mission, perhaps a more important issue is the appropriate tailoring of that force to the operating environment. Once again, the ugly specter of Vietnam reappears—a reminder of a past catastrophic failure of the nation's military institutions to adapt to a particular threat environment.[7] The indiscriminate use of fire power against a lightly armed enemy—at least until regular North Vietnamese units appeared on the battlefield—serves as a reminder of the inherent difficulties facing forces configured, trained and equipped for symmetrical operations when they are up against an opponent using asymmetrical means and tactics.

Images of American troops racing around Baghdad in heavily armored convoys illustrate the difficulties of the operational environment, at least in central Iraq. The British experience in Northern Ireland, for example, suggests the importance of lightly-armed troops patrolling on foot without flak jackets to provide local security for the affected population. Opposition to the occupation forces in central Iraq is driving U.S. forces into their vehicles and forcing them off the streets and away from the very people they are supposed to be protecting. On the positive side, however, there are indications that the forces in central Iraq are adapting to the environment and changing tactics to cope with the opposition.[8] Moreover, the lack of news reporting out of the areas in southern Iraq occupied by eight-odd battalions of the 1st Marine Division suggests that some successes are being achieved in addressing the local security situation. The Marines draw upon their own traditions and historic experience in guerilla wars dating back to counter insurgency operations in Central America in the 1920s and 1930s. In the 1960s, the Marines implemented the Combined Action Platoon program in the I Corps area in Vietnam's five northern provinces, in which the Marines and local villagers shared security duties. While not wholly successful, the program is regarded by many as an interesting and innovative approach to dealing with an entrenched insurgency.[9]

U.S. forces face an extremely difficult operational environment in Central Iraq in which they are being asked to perform a mix of law enforcement, force protection and civic affairs functions. It is hoped that a recently announced troop rotation plan, including the introduction of foreign troops, will ease some of the burden on U.S. forces.

Adapting transformation-type technologies to guerilla-style combat in urban and rural environments is another tactical challenge facing U.S. forces in Iraq that will be confronted elsewhere around the world. Images of CIA operatives with satchels of cash buying off local warlords and Special Forces on horseback in Afghanistan calling in precision air strikes provide a romanticized view of the possibilities presented by marrying modern technology with old fashioned American initiative, ingenuity and cold hard cash. But as illustrated in Afghanistan and Iraq, while it is clear that these technologies are extremely useful during the symmetrical phase of combat operations it seems less clear how these technologies can be usefully applied in the so-called "low intensity" environment.[10] It is easy to see that applying network centric concepts to improve intelligence, enhance quick response by special forces, and integrate coalition forces provide alluring possibilities for successfully dealing with insurgencies. Given the new capabilities being introduced by transformation, it is not so surprising that military organizations are still working through issues associated with integrating these new capabilities into training, doctrine, tactics, techniques and procedures. A look at lessons learned from applying close air support in Operation Enduring Freedom reveal the extent to which many of these issues were worked out on an ad hoc basis as operations unfolded.[11] In the end, however, it bears repeating the truism that these technologies can only complement the basic building block of any military force—the well trained, equipped and prepared soldier/sailor/marine/airman operating as part of a cohesive and integrated unit under good leadership.

Conclusion

Successfully addressing the broad strategic challenge posed to the nation in the occupation of Iraq is linked to a series of important institutional and operational challenges being faced by our military and their accompanying civilian institutions. While it may be too much to suggest these challenges are inextricably intertwined in a domino effect, the national and institutional responses to these challenges will affect our ability to achieve our objectives in Iraq and elsewhere in the new security environment.

The occupation of Iraq comes at time when the Bush Administration is considering a plan to realign the forward deployed presence around the world to better respond to threats in the post-9/11 threat environment. The strains on the force structure will only grow as our commitments increase. It remains unclear whether and/or how the current force structure can be adapted to efficiently address what is sure to be a new array of missions in different operational environments around the world. Adapting the military's current organizational structures to the concepts of transformation and network centric warfare will be a difficult and ongoing task. The next challenge is then applying these technologies for use in the full spectrum of combat environments that our forces will confront—both symmetric and asymmetric. Addressing these successive issues will be a key to successfully using force to achieve the nation's objectives not just in Iraq but also around the world in the new century.

For more topical analysis from the CCC, see our Strategic Insights section.

For related links, see our Middle East Resources.

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